



Episode 1,115: Neocons and Messianism Make for Lousy Statesmanship

Guest: Claes Ryn

WOODS: I just last week read your article in *The American Conservative* about the state of statesmanship in the United States. And there's so much to say about this. You could talk about it historically, which indeed you do to some degree. You could talk about the contrast between what we might hope for and what we have. And to me it seems as if it's not just a matter of there's been a degradation in the quality of people who are running the show, although certainly there has. But I think beyond that, the mentality that informs both parties when they think about the world, namely that we are a unique beacon of enlightenment to the world. So of course what goes unsaid is that our misdeeds are understandable acts of exuberance that certainly we might regret but you can chalk up to good intentions gone wrong. And it seems that this attitude, this messianic attitude makes actual statesmanship completely impossible, and it feeds into the idea that our enemies have no point of view, they can't have a point of view, and all we can expect of them is unconditional surrender.

RYN: Right, which is about the opposite of the spirit of the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Constitution, we remember, was about recognizing that your opponent might actually have a legitimate point of view and was deserving of a hearing. The Constitution was about working out your differences, taking the long view, letting the deliberate sense take over from the passions of the moment. But as you were saying, if you assume that you are on the right side, that there are white hats and black hats, that will to say the least undermine the idea that you need to pull back, you need to recognize that there are others whose interests need to be respected. So this attitude, which is associated with the idea of America being exceptional, is very dangerous, but the fact that it is so prevalent is just about the best evidence you can find that American constitutionalism is petering out. The Constitution hasn't exactly expired, but it's on life support.

WOODS: I'm curious about -- I don't know if this is actually laid out in the article. I can't recall. But can you try to speculate on when exactly this happened? Is it really so easy to say Woodrow Wilson started this? Is there more to it, or did it accelerate in the 20th century at some points?

RYN: You can't date anything like this. As a matter of fact, you could trace the very dubious notions that we're complaining about back to the founding generation. For example, I know this is not the sort of thing you're supposed to say, but you look at a figure like Thomas Jefferson. He was in some ways the odd man out, somebody who was not quite on the wavelength of the framers of the Constitution. Of course, he was off in Paris as American minister to France when the Constitution was written, but he had a kind of temperament, a

kind of dreamy side that was very different from the kind of attitude of, let's say, a John Adams, who was very skeptical of human nature.

That is, the reason that the constitutional temperament was so deep-seated in the American framers was that it came out of a certain view of human nature and society. It was classical. It was Christian. People read the Bible and they read the classics. To be an educated person in America in those days, to be qualified for high leadership, you had to know the classics, and their program of study was classics and more classics and then more classics. And what was the point of all of this? To call attention to the fact that human beings are partly flawed beings. They need to rein in the passions. They need to show respect for others. They need to show restraint, modesty.

And I could go on a long time to illustrate what went into the American notion of leadership. The Constitution was set up to try to push forward people who had these character traits, who would be able genuinely to deliberate. You have the Senate, which was supposed to be the great deliberative body. You have the electoral college, presumably experienced people who would select the president. And you have the Supreme Court. Now, these are all attempts to push into positions of leadership people who would be a little bit or a cut above run-of-the-mill humanity.

And this is the spirit which I associate with statesmanship. Genuinely to understand what an international situation requires takes long views. It takes an historical perspective. It takes critical distance to the passions of the moment. And as you were pointing out before, if you have this idea that your side is the good side and that other side is the bad side, it generates an attitude of uncompromising insistence. *You do as we say. Why shouldn't you? You're on the wrong side.*

WOODS: But to some extent, doesn't ever side think it's on the right side? What's unique about the United States in that regard?

RYN: It's true that all human beings, you and I included, think that we are on the right side. But some people tend to gravitate in the direction of a kind of uninhibited conceit and smugness, whereas the old American constitutional temperament was to question that attitude. The Christians used to say that you should examine your conscience, make sure that what your conscience is telling you is not just a projection of your own egotism. That is to say, to be self-critical, to pull back, and to recognize that you have a fellow human being on the other side, that is something that comes out of the American constitutional tradition, and that is indispensable in statesmanship.

WOODS: I am interested in your reference, by the way, in here to Robert Taft and his position on how the Nazis should be treated after World War II with regard to war crimes, and the fact that JFK -- I don't know to what extent he wrote the book *Profiles in Courage*, but nevertheless, he signed off on it, including a section on Taft in that book as an example of somebody who, knowing full well he would be subjected to a barrage of criticism down the ages for arguing that we need to maintain certain principles of the Western legal tradition even in the face of great enormities like this, that this should be held up as an example to us. It is inconceivable that anyone of any prominence whatsoever today would hold up somebody like that, and so there another ingredient of statesmanship is gone, that it seems like our whole discourse has become preposterously cartoonish such that the kind of nuance Robert Taft was trying to introduce could not even be considered.

RYN: Yes, when you look at so-called public discussion, you are really struck by what you call the cartoonish element of debate. Now, public debate has always been prone in that direction, but the American constitutional temperament, if I may use that phrase loosely, was expected to find its way into journalism and into politics. It should be possible for some people to call the others to order.

Now, if you look for example at the leading newspaper in the capital of the United States, it's an example of the kind of demagoguery that is attributed to the current president or to the newspaper's critics. We have to understand that for statesmanship to be possible in this particular milieu, intellectual journalistic milieu, would probably call on leaders to do it in ways that might surprise us.

That is, how do you act in a statesman-like fashion when the capital of the United States does not really have a real newspaper? There are very few articles in the front section of *The Washington Post* that are not really editorials. And when you turn to the cable channels, the various television news programs, it's striking how demagogic it is. And then to make this almost laughable, the people who write for these very demagogic outlets have the temerity to question the demagoguery of people who resist them. This is a very serious situation. This is a perpetual constitutional crisis, meaning really that nobody cares any longer, it seems, about the deliberate sense of the people, which was a primary concern of the framers.

WOODS: It's also worth noting about Taft specifically, by the way, in the early years after World War II as the Cold War was beginning to take shape, he was actually a cautionary voice. He was warning against the suggestion that what we were seeing from the Soviet Union was altogether unreasonable and without explanation. He argued a variety of things about the Truman doctrine. He said that he didn't see that the Soviet Union was departing from agreements it had made with Churchill and FDR and that we should proceed on the basis of peace and that we were getting these stories coming through about the possibility of war being very acute, and, *Well, what is the evidence for this? Bring forth the evidence. What is actually happening here?*

Now, whether Taft is right or wrong, this is a time when *The Nation* magazine on the left was deciding that he was ringing the bell for Soviet communism, as they put it. So the very fact that he was trying to say, *Hold on a minute. before we go and commit huge resources to this and get ourselves into another conflict, let's just make sure we're interpreting everything that's happening correctly. I understand Stalin's a terrible person. That's not the point. Let's just make sure that this is what it appears to be as opposed to a series of diplomatic blunders.* And even *The Nation* magazine couldn't even bear to hear this.

So I bring that up because today, again, regardless of the merits of Taft's points, which I think are not crazy points, by the way, again, inconceivable -- I mean, thanks to Ron Paul, it's now possible on the right for there to be a few voices of restraint and caution. But really, the idea that anybody could say, *Now, hold on a just a minute. Let's try to get a balanced view of this,* just seems like something out of a fairytale now.

RYN: Yes, now we are in the habit of thinking of ourselves as missionaries for the world, missionaries for a great cause, we are the virtuous ones, we are the nation with a prime responsibility for setting things right in the world. Now, there is an enormous conceit in this attitude, and it is not really challenged in earnest, it seems, by anybody. Now, it seemed for a moment during the recent presidential campaign that Donald Trump was uncomfortable

with this general attitude, but having come into office, he has been sending, shall we say, ambiguous signals. On the one hand, he has signaled that maybe working out our differences with competitors is a good idea, but on the other hand, he's prone to sort of bellicose rhetoric.

But your general point is of course well taken, that that element of dispassionate analysis, of genuine deliberation, taking the long views is in rare supply, which is very serious. I mean, after all, the United States and a few of its competitors have access to nuclear weapons, intercontinental missiles and so on, and it can become extremely cataclysmic to provoke an opponent, to box an opponent into a corner.

If you take the attitude toward Russia, for example, one doesn't have to be a defender of Putin's policies to recognize that it is necessary as a practical matter to diffuse tensions or events may take a horrendous turn. Why is it so hard to imagine, for example, that Russia might feel, shall we call it, encircled by actions by the West, by NATO? Against whom is NATO directed, you might ask. That is, why is it so hard to put yourself in the place of Putin, for example. You don't have to sympathize with him to understand that he, like other leaders, has to be concerned about how to protect his sphere of interest. And it is dangerous merely to throw your weight around. I

'm always reminded, you may remember that Sean Hannity used to have a radio show. Maybe he still does. And he had as a signature song something where the lyrics went something like, "Let's put a boot in their ass, it's the American way." Now, what kind of foolishness is that? I mean, are you setting out to provoke people? Well, then you invite the backlash. And the contrast with the American constitutional temperament, the temperament of statesmanship I don't think could be clearer.

WOODS: I'm curious to know your thoughts about what happened to American conservatism on this front. Now, American conservatism as a self-conscious movement is not really that old, and it wasn't in existence for very long before the Cold War took over. But early on, there were, as I said, some voices of restraint to some degree and that were wary of intervention as the first resort and who didn't speak in the vulgar ways that I associate with so much of American conservatism today. How did that change, in your view?

RYN: That's a complicated issue, but I think it can date, the change you are talking about, to about the '70s and certainly the '80s. I remember being worried about these trends toward a sort of hawkishness that had not necessarily anything to do with the Cold War, although you found it certainly during the Cold War. But at the end of the Cold War, the stage was set among so-called intellectual conservatives for, shall we say, weaponizing the United States on behalf of what was now to be a campaign for reforming the world -- this was democracy and freedom becoming the goals of U.S. foreign policy. America was to pioneer democracy where it had not yet taken hold.

Now, this happened through, briefly put, the neoconservatives who were getting organized in the 1970s. As a matter of fact, you can trace their intellectual origins further back. But in the 1970s and the '80s, they had become a pretty potent force and eventually were to have a decisive influence on U.S. foreign policy. But I do not mean to say that the neoconservatives by themselves were able to initiate this interventionist attitude. You mentioned Woodrow Wilson. He's a forerunner to the neoconservatives in some respects. As we all know, he wanted the United States to make the world safe for democracy. And you can go back further

into American history to find these missionary themes. This is a large and rather complex subject.

WOODS: Well, no doubt, and we know that it plays a substantial role in American history. And of course, Richard Gamble has an interesting study on the use of the city-on-a-hill imagery over the centuries in American history. But that it would strike American conservatism in particular is what I find interesting, because it is so messianic, which, if conservatives understood what they're supposed to be about, is the exact opposite of the conservative temperament, and it acts as if there are no limits. It acts as if our expectations can be infinite. David Frum wrote a book called *An End to Evil*. What kind of preposterous nonsense is this?

RYN: Yeah, that's a goal made to order for people who would like to mobilize all the power, get all the power into their hands, because eradicating evil is a pretty ambitious project and you would have to really mobilize to get that done. But of course, from the point of view of the framers, that sort of a goal is preposterous. Evil will be always with us. But here you have an example of the utopianism of some of the people who were able to insert themselves into so-called conservatism. That is, some of them seem to believe that all that is needed in order for wonderful regimes to appear all over the place is to kick out the dictators. As you get rid of the bad guys, wonderful things happen. It seems to me very disturbing that people with imaginations of that kind will be anywhere close to shaping U.S. foreign policy and U.S. national security.

WOODS: I might add that it reminds me of the old debate in *Modern Age* between Harry Jaffa and M.E. Bradford over equality, because there's another thing that, depending on how it's defined, you could be pursuing equality from now until the end of time and never get there. So yet again, it's tailor-made for people with a will to power. And of course it's portrayed as being done in the spirit of empathy and good will, but if you just tear the mask off --

RYN: Yeah, you're bringing up a subject here which is very relevant to the issue of statesmanship, and that is what you might call for short idealism. That is, a person is idealistic who has wonderful plans for humanity, and the more grandiose the plan, the more beautiful-looking the plan, the greater the goodness of the person's heart. Now, the worst century in human history from the point of view of slaughter and murder was the 20th century. But it was also the most idealistic century ever. The people who did the murdering and the slaughtering were to a very great extent super idealists, that is, the people who wanted to remake the world for the benefit of mankind. Stalin was a great idealist. Lenin before him was a great idealist. Mao was a great idealist.

And the people who formulated U.S. foreign policy pretty much in the post-war period, and especially from Reagan on, trended very strongly in the direction of idealism. Now, they were not quite as nasty as Stalin and Mao and the others, but they had caught the bug, and the bug is what? We are on the side of right, and we have to win against those bad people who are standing in the way of wonderful things. This is a bug that is chronic in American society, it seems, and not least in national security/foreign policy circles.

WOODS: Well, as we wrap up, I want to ask you about something you hinted at already, which is the role of Donald Trump in all this. Now, we know the kind of campaign he led, and there was some ambiguity in what his views were, but he did sound a little bit more restrained than some of the others. Like for example, his criticism of the war in Iraq and his willingness to

acknowledge that the U.S. also does bad things abroad in the same way that people we don't like do bad things. And there just seemed to be, even though not let's say a scholar there, then at least a willingness to look at the world the way a businessman might look at the world, that there's good and bad all around and you've got to try and reach agreements with people you don't like.

And then of course since he's come into power, we don't always see this at work. And of course, given his brash personality, you might superficially think there's no chance you're going to have any movement towards what you're looking for under a guy like that. But I wonder, even though now he seems to be moving even more in favor of having military people advising him all around him, I don't know, is there any lingering hope there that maybe there could be a pattern interrupt with Trump?

RYN: Well, he's thrown a big monkey wrench into a deeply entrenched system, and that may create opportunities for real change. On the other hand, you sometimes wonder whether he really knows who his friends and his enemies are. I speculate whether he might have the idea that you keep your friends close but your enemies closer. But I wonder if there isn't in his general outlook an element of sheer naiveté about who the really influential people in society are. However, he may have decided that to get some change relating to trade and the economy, he has to have some support. He must, as it were, reassure power interests in American society that he couldn't very well take on and survive as president. And I guess the court is still out, or the jury is still out, but the fact that he is so hated by representatives of the permanent government or the deep state, as some people say, is a sign that he does pose a real threat to them.

WOODS: Yeah, the question is, given that -- he's got some similarities with a Pat Buchanan in some ways, but in terms of intellectual curiosity and being very knowledgeable and widely read, that's where the similarities come to an unfortunate end. And as you say in your article, which I'm going to link to on our show notes page, the trouble here is because he's not all that educated in these areas, these critical areas, foreign affairs in particular, he doesn't seem to have the strength to stand up to people who can intimidate him intellectually in effect, and he seems more and more inclined to go along with them.

RYN: Yeah, and he simply does not have the familiarity with personalities. He does not know what experts might be available to enact his stated agenda. Instead, he has to rely on people who have pretty close ties to the permanent government, and so he and his associates have even brought into his administration many of the people who were the butt of his criticisms previously in national security, for example. So he does not quite know how to achieve his objectives, and that's a pretty serious matter.

WOODS: No doubt, no doubt. Can you take a minute to tell me something about the Center for the Study of Statesmanship?

RYN: Yes. How long do we have [laughing]?

WOODS: [laughing] Well, let's say you've got to make your elevator pitch.

RYN: Elevator pitch. What are the preconditions for sound statesmanship? What are the problems that might lead to the opposite of statesmanship: bellicosity, intolerance, short-

sightedness, etc.? To explore what especially the moral and cultural preconditions of statesmanship are is what the center exists to do.

WOODS: Well, very, very interesting. Is it aimed at undergraduates there or is it graduate students, or what's the purpose?

RYN: It's primarily research-oriented, although it is of course going to have good effects for graduate and undergraduate teaching. But we are primarily interested in pursuing a research agenda having to do with, shall we say, rethinking grand strategy, rethinking approaches to international relations, foreign policy, national security. There are certain deeply ingrained habits of thought that we have thought that we have discussed that have to be unsettled. An alternative is urgently needed.

WOODS: Well, very interesting. The website for that for people who would like to look at it is at the Catholic University of America site. It's a page there: CSS.CUA.edu. Well, best of luck with that. I understand it's a fairly new enterprise, and it seems not a moment too soon. And I'm glad to have been able to speak to you today. Thanks so much, Professor Ryn.

RYN: It's been my pleasure. Thank you.